The Untold Story of Yungvald: 
Inside Harvard's Leyzer Ran Archive

Justin Cammy

The Jacob Pat Memorial Lecture

Harvard College Library
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Preface

Publication of this lecture—originally delivered at Harvard on April 15, 2010—is particularly meaningful, for the lecture calls to mind two names that are very important to Yiddish culture in general and to Yiddish Studies at Harvard in particular. The Jacob Pat Memorial Lecture is a tribute to Jacob Pat (1890-1966), a Yiddish writer and educator in his native Poland and subsequently a Jewish labor leader in the United States. The lecture itself touches on the work of Leyzer Ran (1911-1995), who dedicated his life to preserving the record of Yiddish culture in his native Vilna (Vilnius, Lithuania). Both of these significant figures in the history of Yiddish culture also have a special tie to Harvard.

In the case of Jacob Pat, the Harvard College Library numbers among its Judaica book fund endowments The Jacob and Frida Pat Endowment for Yiddish Literature and the Jewish Labor Movement in Eastern Europe, established by the late Frieda Pat, widow of Jacob Pat, in 1979. A permanent endowment, income of which is used in perpetuity for the acquisition of publications in the areas of the fund’s interests and for lectures related to these subjects, the Pat fund has greatly strengthened Harvard’s library resources in the area of Yiddish culture. In doing so, it reflects a continuation of Jacob Pat’s efforts to preserve and enhance the Yiddish cultural heritage and is in effect a living memorial to Jacob Pat and his life’s work.

As for Leyzer Ran, the Harvard College Library has among its resources for the study of Yiddish culture the Leyzer Ran Collection, assembled in the course of his lifetime by Mr. Ran and presented to the Library in 1996 by his widow Basheva Ran, his daughter Faye Ran and his granddaughter Davina Ran. Leyzer Ran passionately and painstakingly assembled an enormous collection of materials related to Jewish life in Vilna—books, pamphlets, ephemera, and archival documents. The Ran Collection is a great research resource and greatly strengthens the Library’s resources in the area of Yiddish Studies. This lecture provides an excellent example of how helpful the Ran Collection can be to scholars.
The Judaica Division of the Harvard College Library is proud to have two such distinguished names in Yiddish culture associated with the Harvard Judaica Collection. We are grateful to have been entrusted with the stewardship of the significant resources that bear their names.

The publication of this lecture is also meaningful because its author is a graduate of Harvard's own Yiddish Studies program. Justin Cammy received his Ph.D. in Yiddish Studies in 2003 from Harvard's Martin Peretz Professor of Yiddish Literature, Ruth Wisse, and he represents, in a sense, a continuation of the work of Jacob Pat and Leyzer Ran by a new generation of scholars—this time within the realm of humanistic research in the American academy. We are very proud of how the Harvard Judaica Collection's extensive resources in the area of Yiddish culture contribute to the study of the Yiddish cultural heritage.

The Judaica Division is preparing for publication a catalog of the Leyzer Ran Collection. This lecture will appear as one of the introductory essays in that catalog. Publication of this lecture has been made possible by The Sherman H. Starr Judaica Library Publication Fund in the Harvard College Library.

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Genius of Place and the Leyzer Ran Archive

For several years I lived with two Leyzers. The first was the animated parodist of the interwar Yiddish literary group Yung Vilne (1927-1940). The second was the leading post-war bibliographer and ephemerist of Jewish Vilne, the city that had given birth to Yung-Vilne prior to its destruction as one of the great cultural centers of Eastern European Jewry. Both Leyzer Volf (1910-1943), all but forgotten Yiddish writer, and Leyzer Ran (1912-1995), chronicler of a murdered civilization, were sons of Vilne. Both were born there just prior to World War I, came of age in its Yiddish schools, clubs, literary circles, and political organizations, and found their calling through contributions to the development of Yiddish cultural and political life in the city through the 1930s.

Leyzer Volf drew enthusiastic audiences to public readings of his poetry, which featured zany, unpredictable verse and political parody that undermined prevailing literary conventions. He also functioned as mentor to younger talents, first in the late 1920s when he encouraged his younger neighbor Abraham Sutzkever to try his hand at poetry, and then again at the end of the decade to Yungvald, a literary fellowship he directed for aspiring writers in the late 1930s. For his part, Leyzer Ran earned a local reputation as one of the young leaders of the scouting organization Bin (Bee), a group which Max Weinreich - the Yiddish linguist and director of the city’s Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) - nurtured as the youth wing of local Yiddishism. As a young man, Leyzer Ran decided to break with Weinreich’s desire to use Bin to carve out a non-partisan space for Jewish youth as overly naïve. Instead, he helped to guide the scouting organization towards a program of collectivization and productivization, inspired by so-
that Ran designed to mark the archive’s contents - a musical note with "Leyzer Ran Archive" written in an elegant Yiddish cursive - attested to his personal investment in the project and his hope that the archive would provide future researchers with a sense of the city’s complex cultural registers. A professional archivist might have cringed at its idiosyncratic organization and storage system. For instance, manuscripts and letters were folded haphazardly, thereby increasing their creasing over time, and related documents were stuffed in old envelopes or in between Sunday newspaper inserts and faintly labeled in pencil. Every week for the better part of a year, under the watchful eye of the Judaica division staff, I would spend an afternoon going through a new box that had been recalled for me from the Harvard Depository, the Library’s remote storage facility. I looked forward to these afternoons, not only because of the anticipation of the unexpected, but because they proved to be a fascinating window into the psychology of post-Holocaust memorialization. By collecting as many documentary fragments of this lost world as possible, Ran hoped that these surviving remnants would enable us to reassemble an image of the whole. The archive contained an impressive amount of pre-war materials, including political pamphlets, newspaper clippings, handwritten manuscripts and typescripts, invitations to cultural events, photographs, art exhibition brochures, and note cards - hundreds of bibliographic cards containing information on what Ran had dubbed “The Yung-Vilne Creative Generation.” At first, this term gave me some pause. As a scholar of Yung-Vilne, I referred to the group’s own official lists and publications to determine its membership. I knew that the group accepted new members into its ranks through a careful vetting process, and that its membership had never exceeded more than a dozen creative figures. By contrast, Ran considered the entirety of the interwar period as the “Yung-Vilne Creative Generation,” capitalizing on the reputation of the group as a symbol of the city’s Yiddish republic of letters in its broadest sense. His more expansive definition of Yung-Vilne included not only the group’s official membership, but several hundred others - writers, painters, sculptors, actors, puppeteers, composers, musicians, dramaturges, journalists, and educators - who existed alongside them in the interwar period as part of a network of cultural producers and activists. Rather than resist his definition, I came to appreciate how Ran’s inclu-
siveness invited us to read the accomplishments of Yung-Vilne with a much richer appreciation of what it had meant to grow up and become a writer within an atmosphere in which Yiddish was the standard of a modern, national culture.

Eventually, I was forced to narrow my research in the Ran archive to focus on those materials that might help me better appreciate what historian Lucy Dawidowicz called “that place and time,” and then to documents specifically related to the official membership of Yung-Vilne. Imagine my delight, then, to discover individual files on the group’s poets Leyzer Volf, Chaim Grade, Sheyne Efron, and Hadasa Rubin; its prose writers Moyshe Levin and Shmerke Kaczerginski; and its painters Rokhl Sutkever and Bentsie Mikhtom. Many of these envelopes contained interwar newspaper clippings, post-war correspondence, bibliographic details, and memoirs about the individuals in question. In the more general files about Yiddish culture in interwar Vilne, I came across a diverse and fascinating array of materials pertaining to the city’s cultural life in which Yung-Vilne’s members had been active participants. These included a collection of local Jewish art exhibits programs from the 1930s; materials from the scouting organization Bin in which Volf and Sutkever spent many a summer day and night; and programs from performances by the local Yiddish theater company Davke, the puppet theater Meydim, and the Yiddish chorus to which group members had contributed their creative energies. The archive also contained rare documents that provided an appreciation of the chronology of the group’s development: a letter from the city’s Jewish Literary Union in January 1936 announcing the acceptance of Yung-Vilne members Chaim Grade, Leyzer Volf, Moyshe Levin, and Shmerke Kaczerginski into its ranks; a note from Abraham Sutkever to Zalmen Reyzin, editor of the Yiddishist daily Vilner tog, about a celebratory gathering in Warsaw in April 1937 marking the publication of his first poetic volume; evidence of the ways in which Chaim Grade carefully balanced the street’s demands for engaged political poetry against his own impulses as a neo-traditionalist, allowing him to be read differently by different audiences; a rare copy of the front cover of Leyzer Volf’s first book, the modernist poem Eviging (1936), which was written in Yiddish but published in Romanized letters; and correspondence with

Figure 1. Invitation on Yung-Vilne stationary to participate in its 10th anniversary issue, 1939. The magazine, intended for publication in October, never appeared. From the Leyzer Ran Collection, Harvard College Library.
the editor of the journal Di tsukunft in New York between 1931-1937 which highlighted efforts by the group to reach an international audience. Among the most touching of finds were an invitation on official Yung-Vilne stationery from July 21, 1939 (Figure 1) inviting important Yiddish writers from overseas to submit original materials for a planned 10th-anniversary issue of its little magazine that would never appear due to the outbreak of war six weeks later, and a letter from Moyshe Shalit, chair of the Jewish Literary Union, dated 31 January 1940, in which he requests a subsidy of heating wood from the Jewish community on behalf of its neediest members. Among the names on the list of the needy we find the Yung-Vilne writers Grade, Vogler, Levin, and Sutzkever. Though the city’s international reputation and sense of self as a Yiddish cultural center was sustained by its writers, now it was they who needed the community’s support for their physical survival.

In the course of my reading I also came across several large files of material related to the poetic career of Leyzer Volf. Ran was instrumental after the war in organizing the publication of a posthumous volume of Volf’s lyrics. He was charged by the book’s editor, H. Leyvik, with culling selections from Volf’s prewar and wartime publications that had fallen into obscurity, tracking down the handwritten autobiography that the poet had submitted as a young man to YIVO’s autobiography competition, and penning the volume’s biographical introduction. Ran’s participation in the project was an expression of his responsibility to the legacy of Nusekh Vilne. The materials included hundreds of poems by Volf that he painstakingly retyped from their original places of publication, newspaper clippings from the 1930s with reviews of Volf’s publications, several unpublished manuscripts of short stories and dramatic poems (including examples of Volf’s efforts to revive Sholem-Aleichem’s beloved fictional creations Teyve the dairyman and the lufmentsh Menakhem-Mendl), and a comprehensive bibliography of Volf’s writings. Then I came across a file that Ran had hand-labeled in pencil: “Yungvald.” The following is the untold story of this last of Vilne’s pre-war Yiddish literary generations.

From Generation to Generation: Yung-Vilne Gives Birth to Yungvald

By 1937, the literary group Yung-Vilne had reached maturity. Its local reputation was secured through the publication of its own literary miscellany and regular public readings of its work. Its poets were appearing with increasing frequency in the national press, including Warsaw’s literary weekly Literarishe bleter, and several had made inroads overseas in such publications as the New York journals Di tsukunft and Inzik. Many of its writers had already released, or were going over the final proofs of their maiden volumes. Despite these collective and individual successes, Yung-Vilne’s members did not forget their origins. Unlike earlier modernist Yiddish literary groupings of the interwar period that had made their mark by rebelling against the literary establishment, Yung-Vilne had been a product of the city’s cultural elite, mentored into existence a decade earlier by the Yiddish poet Moyshe Kulbak, the newspaper editor and writer Zalmen Reyzin, and YIVO director Max Weinreich. It was time, according to the group’s spiritual guide and organizer Shmerke Kaczerginski, for its members to repay the favor. They were spurred to act after a public Yung-Vilne reading in early 1937 when a sixteen-year-old by the name of Hirsh Glik approached the stage and bashfully revealed “there is an entire group of us [who write].” A few days later, Kaczerginski met with Glik, this time with his friends Moyshe Gurvish (penname Gurin), Moyshe Rabinovitch (penname Blit), and Sheva Faynberg in tow. The small group soon expanded from its initial cohort to include Yitskhok Vidutshinski (penname Demb), Shlomke Kahan, and Fayvel Segal, all still in their teens. (Figure 2)

Kaczerginski contacted his Yung-Vilne colleague Leyzer Volf to inquire whether he might be willing to mentor some youth with literary aspirations who lived down the street from him. Though the poet persona Leyzer Volf evoked great confidence, the real life Leyzer Mekler tended to keep to himself. He preferred to spend most of his free time with his beloved cat and mother, and was reputed to be the only male in Vilne involved in its industry of sewing the fingers on leather gloves. Kaczerginski, who was gregarious by nature, hoped that this opportunity might encourage Volf to be a bit more social.
The contact with Volf proved creatively fruitful to his students, especially in persuading them that Yiddish remained a viable language for poetic expression. Initially, this was not obvious to all of Yungvald’s future members, several of whom attended the city’s Hebrew language schools and grew up in its Zionist youth movements. As Gurin explains: “For seven years I attended the Hebrew day school Tarbut ... At the age of 13 [1934] I joined the [Zionist] scouting organization Hashomer hatzair and I remained a member until the war... In 1936, when I began to write, I tried my hands at some Hebrew poems and short stories. Yiddish Vilne soon consumed my Hebrew ...Under Volf’s influence, we moved [from writing in Hebrew] to Yiddish.” Gurin’s comments are critical in eroding the myth, propagated by Vilne’s Yiddishist elite, that their city was the only one in Poland in which Yiddish was organic to Jewish public culture. Gurin reminds us that the hold of Yiddish on the imagination of youth was, at best, tenuous and needed constant nurturing in order to remain relevant to those who were gravitating to Hebrew as the language of Jewish nationalism, or to Polish as the language of economic opportunity and high culture.

Leyzer Volf’s home on Great Snipeshok Street (Wilkomirska in Polish) soon emerged as Yungvald’s spiritual address. The Snipeshok neighborhood was a colorful working-class area across the Viluye River from the city’s traditional Jewish quarter. As Peretz Miranski, Volf’s colleague in Yung-Vilne described it:

Great Snipeshok: ...The street began with a church, followed by military barracks. Beyond that were the Jews. 90% of the street was Jewish. First there were the teachers and a handful of well-off Jews. In the middle were the blue-collar Jews like droshke drivers who divided themselves by family, and at the end were the mercantile Jews, the storeowners who traded with the peasants from the surrounding villages...In the middle of it all there was a coal market. In the summertime wood that had been shipped down the river was traded there, and in the winter, the street was populated by tough Jews who knew how to throw a punch...At the end of the street there were little shops and village traders. There, on a half-paved street crammed with homes, I lived across from my cousin Hirsh Glik. It was the colorfulness of the street that influenced so many poets.xiv

This surfeit of creative energy was tempered by the challenging material conditions in which they all lived. Moyshe Gurin’s recollections of his childhood are typical of those friends who would join him in establishing Yungvald:

My father was frequently unemployed. And my mother, like most mothers of the neighborhood, could only help out with sighs and moans. For seven years I attended the Hebrew school Tarbut. When I graduated in 1935, at the age of 14, the difficult situation at home required me to go out and work, first at a furniture shop, then as a clerk in an ironworks business...It was difficult work - usually from 7:30 in the morning to 9 or 10 at night. I would run the 6 km home, through rain and snow, trying to avoid the [Polish] hooligans waiting in the lanes.xvii

The contrast between the young writers’ meager physical resources and the refuge they found in writing is a common theme of the Yungvald memoirists. Gurin recalls their first Friday night gathering at Leyzer Volf’s in 1937 as one freighted with anticipation:

Our thin pages shook under our arms... How would we be received? ...The door opened with a heavy squeak. Leyzer’s mother was lighting Sabbath candles... We entered a second room and sat by a gas lamp to read our first poems in Yiddish. Leyzer listened carefully...He pointed to the weak parts and gave us our first lecture about poetry...One thing was clear to us... We suddenly had a leader and a teacher.xviii

The group continued to meet at Leyzer’s home every Friday evening or Saturday after lunch to read their newest works, listen to critiques of their writing, leaf through new books or journals that Leyzer had received, and hear their teacher read from his newest creations. Instead of the synagogue, this secular generation religiously dedicated their Sabbaths to the Yiddish muse around Leyzer Volf’s table, which his mother always set with a white
tablecloth cut out of respect for the occasion. In the same way that one might remove one’s shoes upon entering a sacred space, these weekly meetings were experienced by those present as a holy fellowship.

Membership in Yungvald – which means Virgin Forest – was experienced as entry into a pristine world unblemished by contemporary politics or poverty: “I entered the forest with a friend / leaving my shoes on the floor… I asked my friend: What do you see in the trees? / A blossoming dream.”

Vilne itself was ringed with rich forests of pine, spruce, and birch trees through which local youth regularly hiked as part of their school excursions or participation in various Jewish scouting movements. Visits to the forest were a way to shake off the pressures of poverty and revel in the abundant richness of the environment. Yungvald was thus a resonant name for a new poetic group, carrying with it the regenerative promise of natural self-expression. Moyshe Blit recalls how those literary gatherings sustained them for the entire week: “From that moment on we gathered every week at Leyzer’s, also organizing walks outside the city among ourselves where we would read our writings. We were so used to Leyzer and to these meetings that when something came up and we could not meet for a week or two, we all felt wretched.”

The program at these weekly gatherings was ritualized, with the engaged study of one another’s writing a secular transference of the traditional Jewish appetite for analysis of holy writ. Everyone always sat in the same place so as to encourage discipline. Each aspiring writer would be given an opportunity to read a draft of the work that he considered most polished. Feedback and discussion then ensued. When all of the beginners had completed their readings, Volf would go over to his literary stash to select something of his own to present. His desk and armoire were in the same room where these weekly Sabbath meetings took place, and its drawers were stuffed with hundreds of pieces of paper and the narrow accounting books in which he compulsively scribbled his ideas. Whenever he read, Volf would rub his bald head and recite his poetry in a monotone voice, interrupting himself only with the occasional chuckle. The experience was enough to mesmerize all in attendance. Gurin recalls that “we sat as if in another world,” while Demb adds:

The mood at Volf’s was always festive. His comments on our diction, grammatical problems related to rhythm, and content were not the most important thing. More important was that we had Yung-Vilne’s poet of the people as our mentor. He did not let any beginner slip through his fingers. He sat over us as a hen sits over its eggs, waiting with great anticipation for the little chicks to peck their way out… And then the door would swing open and in would run the young neighborhood composer Leyb Egoz who would throw himself down at the table and sing the music he had just composed to one of Leyzer’s poems. …The atmosphere was songful.

Yungvald’s Sabbath gatherings at Leyzer’s home were an occasion not only for its neophyte writers to learn the process of creative collaboration, but to learn technique from established poets. Though Volf was their official guide and host, at any moment one of his friends from Yung-Vilne might drop in unannounced to participate. Sutzkever and Miranski, both of whom lived on the same street, were especially frequent guests. This was a way for Yung-Vilne to nurture the fragile sprouts that might succeed them as the city’s next literary generation, and it provided the young members of Yungvald with the singular opportunity to discuss the latest developments in Yiddish literature with leading members of the city’s Yiddish literary scene. Yung-Vilne’s commitment to artistic mentorship was reciprocated by Yungvald’s emotional attachment to their teachers. “We did not miss a single literary evening dedicated to Yung-Vilne or one of its members. We looked up to our older colleagues with respect, and listened to their advice.”

Volf also attempted to expose his protégés to the multilingual nature of the contemporary literary scene by occasionally inviting a Polish or Belorussian writer to the group’s meetings, as when Maxim Tank (the future People’s Poet of Soviet Belarus) dropped in one afternoon.

What comes through in the various memoirs of Volf by his former students in Yungvald is the seriousness of his mentoring and the force of his artistic personality. Fayvl Segal, one of its last members to join, recalls his introduction to the group:
In 1939 I met and befriended Hirshke Glik. I revealed my poetic aspirations to him. He invited me to come to a meeting of "Yungvald," a young writers' group of which he was a member. One Sabbath day that spring Glik brought me over to Volf's for a meeting of the group. I was clutching my notebook as I went to my judgment. Leyzer's apartment on Wilkomirskaja 28 was at the far end of a deep courtyard ... I introduced myself and I heard his curt response: Leyzer Mekler. Huge eyes from under a high, naked forehead gazed out at me. His mouth pulled into a smile... This Leyzer was absolutely unlike the wolfish Leyzer I expected from having read his poems. ... He spoke like a peer among peers. ... He taught with a warm word and friendly eyes, delicately, confidently, without getting worked up ... At the end of the meeting, Leyzer invited me to read something of my own. As far as I can remember, I read a poem about Vilne. I thought that it was my best sample. At first, his eyes shone ... But then his face became cold. He thought for a moment silently: 'You have to polish more.' Seeing my reaction, he went on: 'The beginning is so-so, it must be reworked.' He then turned back to the gathering as if nothing had happened. I left shattered. Glik mocked my sad mood.

Segal’s recollections go on to describe his efforts to rework the poem, and the joy of satisfaction when Volf complimented its revisions and suggested its publication. When Segal brought a series of graphic sketches he had completed to a Yungvald session in 1939, Volf immediately introduced him to Yung-Vilne’s artist Bentsie Mikhtom who suggested that one appear in the next issue of the magazine. Segal fondly remembers: "We all loved Leyzer Volf ... He tended to our young forest like an expert gardener." In dedicating his Sabbaths to the youth of Yungvald for the better part of two years, Volf behaved as if he "felt himself as much a member of Yungvald as of Yung-Vilne." This was the way of *Nursekh Vilne* in which one generation assumed responsibility for planting the seeds of the generation to follow.

Figure 2. Photograph of Yungvald, 1938. From the Leyzer Ran Collection, Harvard College Library. Top Row: Moyshe Gurin (L), Yitskhok Demb (R) Middle Row: Leyzer Volf (L), Moyshe Blit (R) Bottom: Hirsh Glik
The Yungvald Magazine

By 1938, the group decided that the time was ripe to put out a magazine to showcase its writing. It was only then that they officially adopted the name Yungvald. Prior to that, there had been no need to provide a label to the regular gatherings of these literary amateurs. The selection was a nod to its parent group, Yung-Vilne, which was metaphorically sprouting new growths through them. Yungvald had also been the name of an early Soviet Yiddish publication; in reclaiming this name from the archives of Yiddish literary history they were suggesting that it was their variety of cultural Yiddishism, not Communism, which was the truer vanguard for the Jewish nation.

The four issues of Yungvald: a literarishe zamlekh (Figure 3) that appeared between January and April 1939 were a source of great pride to the young writers. Though Moyshe Rabinovitsh was listed as editor on its masthead so that the group would be able to take ownership over its creative production, its contributors readily acknowledged that Volf served as its guiding creative force and shadow editor. The miscellany was professionally set at the local press of Sz. Lichtmakher, but it did not carry any visual art and was kept to a modest eight pages in length in order to minimize costs. Volf’s own contributions – published under his own penname or via such pseudonyms as Beast of Courage or Still of the Night - amounted to almost half of each issue’s contents. His presence in its pages granted prestige to the new publication.

The remainder of the space was reserved for the most polished work by Yungvald’s own membership. Though Glik, Gurin, Blit, and Demb all secured regular space in its pages, the work of Sheva Feynberg and Fayvl Segal did not have an opportunity to appear before economic pressures forced the magazine’s sudden closure prior to the release of a planned fifth issue in May 1939. Though they issued an appeal to the community in an attempt to secure the magazine’s survival (“Young and old…Read Yungvald. Advertise. We must disseminate Yungvald to our youth”) by 1939 the economic situation of Jewish Vilne was so desperate that even this center of Yiddish culture could not support them.
The magazine’s overall tone was dominated by Leyzer Volf’s irony and humor, and by the artistic range of his contributions. These included fables, a dramatic poem, short lyrics, prose sketches, and tongue-in-cheek biographical tributes to fellow writers. His pithy, often irreverent observations communicated the importance of levity as a counterforce to the political storm brewing across the Western border with Germany, the threats against Jews that accompanied the rise of Polish nationalism at home, and the challenging economic conditions for many local Jews:

-The sun is good, so long as it isn’t in your eyes.
-Art is desire, and ability.
-Do not hate with all your soul, or you will lose your soul.
-Love with all your soul, and you will win a soul.
-That which doesn’t frighten us is unnatural.
-Do we come from apes? Perhaps it is the opposite.
-Dictators dictate, but a dictate is rarely without its followers.
-On the border between suffering and hope is love.
-If the world had a beginning, it must have an end.\textsuperscript{xxxii}

These aphorisms and random ‘thoughts’ on the human condition that he published in each issue were playfully philosophical, a tension between mood and thought that was a signature of his poetic style.

Elsewhere, the short prose and fables that Volf contributed to each issue allowed him to show his students how one could comment indirectly on the brewing political crisis through exotic settings and characters. In one example, the ramblings of a war mongering Latin American leader conclude with the nihilist vision that “humanity wants murder. Without murder there is no humanity.”\textsuperscript{xxxiii} In the miniature “Allah,” we find his trademark irreverence coupled with a humanist’s sensibility. Allah is sitting in the shadows smoking a cigarette when he is approached by a pretty young woman who reveals that “I feel like the only survivor of a sinking ship. Can I count on your love?” Rather than make a promise He may not be able to keep, Allah turns the tables on her: “Madame, nobody feels as alone as Allah, and nobody is as alone as Allah! Can I count on your love?”\textsuperscript{xxxiv} Aside from the sacrilege of this somewhat racy encounter, Volf brings responsibility for justice down from the heavens to humanity by tempering her faith in some form of miraculous salvation. Even in the fables that he contributed to \textit{Yungvald}, Volf took advantage of the surface innocence of the genre to comment on the brutality of the age.

Volf also used the new magazine to replay some of his more outrageous poetic stunts in order to prompt \textit{Yungvald}’s writers to free themselves from their poetic inhibitions. For instance, the second issue included six lyrics from Volf’s series “1001 Poems” that he had composed in June 1930 when he was attempting to break the world record for the number of poems written in a month. Back then Volf was just starting out in his career, much like the students he was now mentoring. His selections implied that there was a large world of creative possibilities beyond the narrowness of their immediate environment:

-Vilne has become ugly to me
-With its many ghetto streets.
-Off into the wide world.
-Join a circus.
-Become president of America
-Or King of England
-Or a crocodile in the Nile
-Or a poem in an amazing style.\textsuperscript{xxxv}

The two opening lines deflate the poetic pride of place that had reached its apex in Moyshe Kulbak’s neo-romantic ode to the city (“Vilne,” 1926) and set his students free to rebel in any way they chose against the expectations of their community.

On a different note, Volf’s review in \textit{Yungvald} of Elkhonen Vogler’s poetic volume \textit{Tsvey beriozes baym trakti} (Two Birch-Trees on the Highway, 1938) demonstrated the importance of a literary coterie in celebrating the achievements of its members. Vogler was Volf’s longtime colleague in Yung-Vilne, and that group made it a habit of honoring its members whenever one of them published a new volume. The review not only afforded Volf the opportunity to underscore the importance of mutual support in the creative
process, but also proved an effective teaching moment, given complaints from professional critics that Vogler’s verse—a symbolic reading of the local landscape—was too politically detached to resonate with contemporary readers. Volf responded by celebrating the volume’s “symphony of metaphor,” commending Vogler for “let[ting] his fantasy run free. He does not attempt to dampen his poetic vision with the cold sharpness of the rational... He is intuitive, wild, unique, and beautifully crazy... He does not so much ignore human beings as much as he runs from them, taking refuge in the forest.” In this way, Volf provided permission to his young charges to allow their imaginations the greatest possible freedom. His comments released them from the obligation that their art necessarily reflect the realities of the Jewish street.

At the same time that Volf imagined poetry as a liberating force, he also struggled to root his young saplings in a literary tradition. Through pithy biographic sketches of such Yiddish writers as Sholem-Aleichem, Y.L. Peretz, Morris Rosenfeld, Yehoash, I.M. Vaysenberg, A. Lyessin, H. Leyvik, Moyshe-Leyb Halpem, and Moyshe Kulbak, Volf provided Yungvald with an identity as heirs to a significant literary tradition, while suggesting that they not treat it too piously.

Volf used Yungvald to showcase his attempts to mine the Yiddish literary tradition for inspiration. In so doing he sought to keep it relevant for younger generations who were increasingly influenced by Polish culture. For instance, he published a new fictional exchange of letters between Sholem-Aleichem’s beloved fictional couple Menakhem-Mendl and Sheyne-Sheyndl. He began work on this series of new epistolary interchanges between the pair in 1935, with the intention of publishing a book called The New Menakhem-Mendl upon its completion. Though the book was never finished (and its manuscript lost during the war), this was yet another gesture of creative betrayal designed to demonstrate the depth of the Yiddish literary well... Menakhem-Mendl, prototype for the lufmentsh, and Sheyne-Sheyndl, the feminine force of practicality, were ideal voices through which to contemplate how his spirit of unbridled optimism and her traditional rationalism would have dealt with the challenges of the Jewish 1930s. In Volf’s fantasy, Sheyne-Sheyndl has grown old in their imagined shtetl of Ksrlievke, urging her husband to give up on the false political and economic messianisms he has bought into and return home. But Menakhem-Mendl is smitten with the fantasy of new Jewish worlds elsewhere, first writing to her from a new settlement in the Land of Israel and then from a Jewish collective farm in Soviet Biobidzhan (a strange place indeed for this character who had, until then, represented the excesses of capitalist fantasy). Both Israel and Biobidzhan function as alternative sites for the creation of the “new Jew” and his renewed relationship to land. In the excerpt that Volf submitted to Yungvald, we meet up with Menakhem-Mendl in Paris where he is a struggling shopkeeper awaiting a travel certificate to Biobidzhan. Volf takes great pleasure in playing up the innocence that Sholem-Aleichem first brought to this character by showing him somewhat out of his league in understanding the significance of his surroundings and the times. His letters back to the shtetl refer to Einstein (“Einstein himself comes to buy from me. He says that ‘everything is relative’. By this he probably means that we’re not at all in good shape”), Hitler (“Hitler discovered that my great grandmother slept with Frederick the Great. It’s possible that I’m entitled to a piece of the inheritance”), and Stalin (“I’ll remain eternally poor if the second Five-Year plan of Comrade Stalin doesn’t help soon. It’s useless. Trotsky no longer stands up for me.”). Menakhem-Mendl’s complete lack of sophistication in distinguishing friend from foe shows that for the simple Jew the age of ideology did not provide greater clarity. Rather, it has added to the Jews’ confusion and dislocation. In the same letter in which he writes of reestablishing himself in Biobidzhan, Menakhem-Mendl also suggests to his wife that if they can make it through another year they will be able to “preside over our own counter in Palestine.” Given the animosity between Jewish Zionists and Communists, the intimation that either option would suit him just fine suggests that the ultimate goal for Menakhem-Mendl is to get out of Europe one way or another. By this point, political convictions are secondary to saving one’s skin.

By contrast, Sheyne-Sheyndl continues to function as the stern voice of practical reality by attempting to re-focus her husband’s attention on the necessity of circling the wagons at home in Eastern Europe.
To my dear husband Menakhem-Mendl

Moysheke went off for a year to a kibbutz, and Meylekh now sits in jail. What did he do? He hung a banner on a wire and a cop caught him... You should have beaten him to a pulp. Now he will be in jail for eight years... If you happen to know Hitler then run some interference with him on behalf of our Meylekh. I want to be entirely clear with you. If you don’t come home by Purim I will find you and beat your brains out with a slab of wood. As Mother says: ‘pride and foolishness have the same source.’ What do you think of that? ... I am old, sick, and broken. I toil with my last ounce of strength. And you still live on faith alone... Though you have nothing material to speak of, there is no shame in that. Tell me, who is this Frida the Great from whom you expect an inheritance? ... In God’s name, do not journey to Birobidzhan... And don’t think that you can hitch onto some pioneer with a certificite [sic] and run away with her to Palestine. I’m telling you: I can also be a heroine. I will cast aside the children, run after you, and drag you home on all fours. As Mother says: ‘A thief has bars on his cell [to keep him in check], and children ought to have a father.’

Such adaptations of Sheyne-Sheyndl’s folk-wisdom from her Mother, used to underscore modernity’s challenges to the coherency of the Jewish family, were central components in Volf’s aesthetic of sophisticated folksiness. In updating the Menakhem-Mendel letters for a new generation of readers, Volf invited contemporary Yiddish authors to express their opinions about the state of Jewish political life from within the contours of their literary tradition rather than outside of it.

By the spring of 1939, it was almost impossible for a Yiddish writer in Poland to escape the pressure of the so-called Jewish question. Yiddish readers looked to their writers for guidance in helping them negotiate their anxieties. Volf struggled to find a balance between his commitment to art and the politics of the street. He eventually allied himself with a local branch of the Territorialist movement, in part because it provided a convenient home for the continued expression of his cultural Yiddishism. At a conference of the Territorialist Freeland League held in Vilnie in January 1939, he concluded: “At first, I was a cosmopolitan. But then I realized that for a people to live a normal life it must have the space to live within its own culture. Yiddish language and culture can only exist and continue to develop freely when our nation is geographically concentrated and liberated from undue foreign influences.”

The Territorialist plans to develop Jewish colonies for the masses in East Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe seemed to him a necessary step to ensure the survival of a sphere for Yiddish in the face of threats to the heartland of Yiddish from Nazi Germany to the West, Soviet Russia to the East, and Polish nationalism from within. In Vilnie, the focus of the Freeland League was less on immediate emigration than on training local youth in agriculture, industrial productivity, and Jewish cultural self-confidence.

Volf rejoined Shparber (Hawk), the youth wing of the Territorialists, in 1938, after having broken with it earlier in the decade. He ran for city elections on its list, traveled to Warsaw to meet with young representatives of the Territorialist Freeland League, and led a Shparber summer camp for teenagers in the summer of 1939. Since his work with Byungvald coincided with his renewed political activities, several of his mentees in Yungvald followed him into Shparber and took up its cause. The final issue of Yungvald anticipated the artistic fruition of these political commitments with the announcement of the pending completion of Volf’s futuristic novel Mizekh un mariv (“East and West”). The novel set out to imagine how three current proposed solutions to the Jewish question would play out by the end of the 20th century: a Soviet Jewish republic in Birobidzhan, a Hebrew-speaking Zionist homeland Palestine, and a Yiddish Free Land in Australia.

Despite an announcement in the final issue of Yungvald that the novel would appear in weekly installments after Passover, the magazine ceased publication after its April issue. Volf never saw it through to publication elsewhere and the manuscript disappeared with Volf’s other writings during the war. His political commitments left little doubt that it would affirm the cultural necessity of creating independent Yiddish-speaking com-
munities organized around the principles of secular humanism and equality elsewhere as a way to secure a future for Yiddish culture. At the same time that he was nurturing the next local generation of Yiddish writers, he also had concluded that preparations needed to be put in place to transplant them to more welcoming soil.\textsuperscript{xi}

**Yungvald’s Young Voices**

Leyzer Volf’s poetic persona dominated Yungvald. His contributions set its tone and provided it with the credibility of a published poet. However, the magazine was also a forum for Vilne’s newest writers who were not yet artistically mature enough to be admitted into Yung-Vilne itself or who needed some local exposure before their contributions might be accepted by the Yiddish press. What were they interested in writing about in the winter of 1939? As might be expected, death, anxiety about the future, and economic hardship were consistent themes. Moyshe Gurin effectively communicated the mood of this generation by having his speakers perform their own self-effacement.

\begin{quote}
Ikh bin an anderer. 
Nisht der vos kh‘bin a mol geven. 
Ikh bin ein Eyvazer vanderer, 
a baladener mi pek.

Es iz der griner barg nishto 
Es iz dos shitik himl-blo 
farshvundn fun mayn oyg.

Un unter shvern gepek 
bafalt mikh oft mol oykh a shrek
az ikh aleyn bin oykh nishto.\textsuperscript{xi}
\end{quote}

I am someone else. 
Not who I used to be. 
I am a lonely wanderer 
Loaded down with sacks.

The hill is no longer green, 
And the last patch of blue in the sky 
has disappeared from my gaze.

And under my heavy load 
I am overcome by the fear 
That I myself am no more.

Gurin’s lyrics typify the mood of the young poets’ verse, which portrays them as the solitary, deformed survivors of an inescapable cataclysm. The social nature of their configuration as a group did not seem to dull this profound sense that they were on their own at the edge of an historical abyss.\textsuperscript{xii}

The group’s prose writer Yitskhok Demb was particularly concerned with the explosion of Jewish poverty that dominated his world. By 1939, Vilne Jewry was deeply stratified by class. A modest middle class lived in the newer areas of the city, especially in the neighborhood of Pohulanke, whereas the working class was confined to Snipeshok or to the treeless, crowded alleys of the traditional Jewish quarter. In order to draw attention to the widening social gap produced by class divisions, Demb alternated between naturalistic depictions of urban poverty and satire. In one such naturalistic vignette, “The Porter,” he stresses the harsh effects of the winter conditions on the body and morale of a simple laborer. The reader is made to feel the rope tear into the porter’s shoulders and press against his veins while he carries his wares to his unappreciative customers. The entire atmosphere is bleak and devoid of any color except for grays and dirty whites. All the while, the porter’s four-year-old son lies at home frozen because his family is unable to afford sufficient wood for heating. His body is not curled up in childhood warmth but is as taut as the porter’s rope carried by his father.\textsuperscript{xiii} Poverty had become a generational inheritance from which there seemed to be little escape.

Demb also tried his hand at satire as a form of class critique. In “The Made-moiseille’s Oy” he mocks the speech patterns of the Jewish parvenue by showcasing the ways in which a wealthy woman peppers her comments
with oy to express everything from exasperation and disgust to pity and joy.

"Valie, Valie! Oy, move faster, Valie!"

The thin, frightened servant girl appeared on the edge of the threshold:
- "What is it, Madame?"
- "Did the seamstress already bring my dress?"
- "No, Madame, not yet!"
- "But it is already eleven and at three I have to go out with Jerik. Oy, this is terrible. Oy, how can I possibly complete my toilette in such a short time?"

.... She was already an older young woman at the age of thirty-one. Her hair was askew.... She nervously tapped with her stick and let out a chorus of oys. She oyed about the unfinished work of the seamstress, about the short time for her to get herself together, and about many other matters. This "oy" was a nervous oy. An oy mixed with a sigh.

When Valie came back with the dress she let out a high-pitched oy, full of joy. But then, noticing the seamstress with her, she let loose an angry oy, full of rage.

"Oy, so late! I wanted it no later than ten. Oy, people these days have no sense of punctuality!"

The seamstress also answered with an oy. A pitiful oy, one that falls softly to one's feet....

... The mistress walked to the place they had agreed upon. She needed the fresh air. She had arranged to meet Jerik next to Zimmerman's hotel and it was a ten-minute walk at most. Another oy escaped, this time a sigh. And when she came across someone in the clothes of a laborer - hands blackened, face waxen, eyes fallen - she oyed to herself: "How can people go about like that? Oy, aren't people ashamed! Oy, I don't accept this. Oy, I'm dying! Oy... Do I still have far to go?..."

They were capricious oys. Nervous oys! ...She couldn't get rid of the image of the worker in front of her - his smell, his sweat. And out escaped another oy. She followed it with a second one that had more pity to it, something that conveyed the essence of "poor man, poor thing, he doesn't earn enough." She grabbed for her handbag and handkerchief, dabbed her eyes, and deposited a long, extended oy into the bag ... And when she saw Jerik's limousine and then Jerik himself outside Zimmerman's hotel, she let out a radiating oy of joy.iii

The reader is carried away by her repertoire, allowing Demb to craft a biting satire of those who are indifferent to those who serve them and suffer around them.

If the aforementioned young contributors to Yungvold constituted its supporting cast, Hirsh Glik was its most promising star and Volf's favorite student. Though the broad-shouldered poet with the dirty boots, poetic forelock, and deep blue eyes was only 17 when the group came together in 1937, he quickly emerged as its most productive member. Yungvold published seven of his works in its short run, and his poetry also managed to find its way into the local Yiddish press. Glik's fellow writers immediately recognized his talent, even if he required a little encouragement. Though his cousin Perez Miranski remembers Glik as a shy young teenager ("He would come to me trembling... to drop off his booklet of newly written poems, and then ran off, too shy to wait to hear a good word about them"), the group atmosphere and close mentorship of Yungvold was just what he needed in order to cut his poetic teeth and gain some confidence. Biltz remembers that "if Leyzer [Volf] provided the tone and leadership [for Yungvold], Glik provided its soul." Demb adds that "Glik did not read his poems, he sang them in a melodic, elevated voice... He was the most beloved of our small gang." He was admired not only for spirit, but also for his commitment to his development as a writer. Glik's family counted on him for its economic survival, and often he could be found downtown dragging heavy packages as part of his work as a shipping apprentice in a paper business. Every moment free from work was spent on his literary development. As he once quipped: "I could go twice a week
without lunch, but never a Friday without Literarishe bleter!"11

"Once upon a Time," Glik’s first poem to appear in Yungvald, expressed the tension between the speaker’s dreams of escape and his eventual acceptance that in these challenging times, it was time to develop the home front:

Ikh heb getroymt a mol
tsu vem a milner in a vint-til
hinter a vyain barg, hinter a zaydn gniren Tol,
hinter zin yakelekh shelisheide shil...

Hot a vint mayn troym farfregn.

Ikh heb getroymt a mol tsu zayn a meylekh
in a vyain, mayn land,
vu di boymer myshyn freylekh
menishn naket, on keyn shand...
Bin ikh naket gebilbn af kremendike rogn.
Un ikh troym nokh haynt a troym
Un s’iz mir gut:
Ikh bet bloyz a bisl mut
Un kh’pruv anisterbrehn yeece tseym...
Un ikh vil mayn troym keynm nif zogn.12

Once upon a time, I dreamed
of being a miller in a windmill
behind a distant hill in a lush valley
where rivulets whisper quietly...

A breeze carried my dream away.

Once upon a time I dreamed of being a king
in a far off land
where trees nuzzle joyfully
and people frolic naked, without any shame...
But I remained behind, naked in shop corners.
And the dream I still dream today
emboldens me:
I am asking for just a little courage
As I try to break down barriers...
And I do not want to reveal my dream to anyone.

Despite the speaker’s Edenic fairytale, in the end he reconciles himself to the differences between fantasy and reality, individual desire and collective responsibility. In its penultimate line, he steps forward to commit to becoming a force for social change in challenging times, even if it means that he must temporarily mute his private dream of escape into frivolity.

In “Samson” Glik found inspiration in the Biblical hero as a model of national endurance in the face of mockery by one’s enemies. Glik sought to steel his readers in the face of the threats from Nazi Germany and outbreaks of nationalist anti-Semitism at home by recalling earlier models of Jewish heroism.13 In the end, it is not Samson’s voice that dominates the poem, but rather that of the poem’s contemporary speaker:

O, held! Tsu dir mayne greste loybn!
Kh shey vi du mit gekovete hent,
Nor s’ljet a funk fun lestn gloybn
Un unter mir der shayter bren...
Nor fremd iz mir di shrek,
Es zingt in mir a yeeder ever...
Velt! Oykh ‘vel avuk,
Velt ikh dikh miishelep in keyver.15

O hero! My greatest praise to you!
I stand like you with shackled hands
The spark of my faith still glows
while beneath me the pyre burns...
But fear is a stranger to me,
Each limb sings in me...
World! If I am on the way out,
I’m dragging you with me to the grave!

Glik’s defiance positioned him well for his wartime role in crafting a poetics of resistance. Well before he joined the Jewish partisans of the Vilne Ghetto during the Nazi occupation of his city, his apprenticeship in Yungvald provided him with the confidence and disposition of a communal leader. It was the camaraderie and cultural confidence fostered by Volf between 1937-1939 that contributed to Glik’s understanding of what it meant for a poet to serve one’s people in challenging times. In 1940, when the rest of Europe was in the midst of war and the city’s Jews were adjusting themselves to their new Soviet, then Lithuanian rulers, he completed a poem in honor of Vilne’s martyred son and folk hero Hirsh Lekert. Lekert was hanged in May 1902 after he attempted to assassinate the Russian governor of Vilna to avenge the flogging of Jewish demonstrators from the socialist Bund. Then, during the years of Nazi occupation, he offered up tributes to the murdered resistance fighters Itsik Vitenberg (who headed the United Partisan Organization in the ghetto) and Vitka Kempner, a female partisan who helped to blow up a German military transport near the city in 1942, both local heroes.1b Glik, who returned only occasionally to the ghetto from his assignment as a hard laborer at a work camp, regularly read for ghetto youth and presented his newest writings at gatherings of the ghetto’s literary union. On one such occasion to mark “springtime in Yiddish literature” in May 1943 he unveiled his most enduring work, “Zog nish keymol!”15 (Never Say Never). Glik delivered the lyrics as a march, setting them to a familiar melody by Russian composer Dmitri Pokrass, giving birth to what would eventually come to be known as “The Partisan Hymn.” Word of the poem spread quickly from the underground resistance, raising morale and encouraging defiance and self-defense. Though Glik was murdered in the summer of 1944, Yungvald had given birth to its own folk hero.
Yungvald and the Post-War Myth of Nusekh Vilne

Despite the enthusiasm generated by the emergence in 1939 of a new Yiddish literary magazine for local aspiring writers, not everyone was convinced that they could save Eastern European Jewish culture from the politics that threatened to consume it. At a March 1939 evening (Figure 4) sponsored by Yung-Vilne in honor of the publication of Leyzer Volf’s newest poetic volume, Shvartse Perl (Black Pearls), the community leader Joseph Tshernichov offered an enigmatic anecdote of a survivor of the Titanic who claimed that as the ship was going down a steward approached him demanding payment for his bill. Tshernichov looked out at the stunned hall and remarked: “Even in stormy times we must cover the accounts of Yiddish literature.”

Tshernichov betrayed the profound despair of the community at this moment: it had no choice but to continue to celebrate its cultural accomplishments, though history might look back at them as passengers on a doomed ship. By contrast, Avrom Reyzin – separated by an ocean in New York and somewhat immune from the political climate in Poland that colored the perspective of Volf and Tshernichov - was far more optimistic. He viewed Yungvald as evidence of Yiddish creative continuity at a time when the Yiddish scene in New York found itself victim to mounting disinterest on the part of the assimilating children of immigrants.

Upon receiving the first two issues of the group’s magazine he published an excited review in New York’s Feder: “Yungvald, published by the very youngest associates of Yung-Vilne, is more than a delightful publication. It is a message of good tidings ... evidence that Yung-Vilne has already nurtured a Yungvald – a forest of young saplings ... May the forest bloom, may its true song rustle through its green leaves.”

In New York, Yungvald was greeted as a sign of hope that the European center of Yiddish culture had the internal capacities to regenerate itself.

In the end, it was the action of Leyzer Volf himself that put a premature end to the official gatherings of the group when he decided to follow Soviet troops in retreat from their occupation of Vilne in October 1939. He hoped to reunite with his sister across the border, and escape the air of uncertainty that the new Lithuanian regime, a satellite creation of the Soviets, was sure to bring to the city’s Jewish life. As Blit recalls, the last time Yungvald

Figure 4. Invitation from Yung-Vilne to attend a celebratory evening in honor of Leyzer Volf’s publication of Shvartse perl (1939). From the Leyzer Ran Collection, Harvard College Library.
gathered at Volf's apartment "was extremely difficult. We all kissed, and went our own way." To mark the first anniversary of Volf's departure, Hirsh Glik penned "The Night of September 1939" in which he contrasted the Soviet effort to deliver political salvation by force against the redemptive experience of creative fellowship.

Oh, I will remember those nights in your home for all eternity.  
The smoky gas lamp casting its pale light, 
The sacred quiver in our eyes.  
I will never forget the fire of your wolfish expression,  
The silent joy, and the feverish squirming of our souls.  

A redeemer stands by the gates of the city,  
Waiting. He will march in at sunrise.  
He takes his first steely step  
And night comes pouring in.  

The lamp flickers. You speak. Your word — an emboldening stroke  
For those born at dawn...  
Dear Leyzer, today I read one of your sonnets  
And my memory was set ablaze.  

According to Glik, the Soviet "redeemer" summoned darkness under the guise of bringing light, while Volf's band of neophyte poets represented a new dawn for Yiddish creativity at a time of desperation. The ode simultaneously sought to honor a beloved mentor and served as a courageous act of resistance to the Soviet reoccupation of Vilne in the summer of 1940 that had resulted in the systematic closure of all sources of independent Yiddish publishing. Even in his absence, Volf continued to inspire his young charges to resist political domination through Yiddish expression as a form of cultural resistance.

Once safely across the Soviet border, Leyzer Volf eventually made his way to Uzbekistan in attempt to avoid the fighting. He succumbed to starvation and typhoid in the winter of 1943, though not before he had gathered enough new material to allow for the posthumous publication of a collection of wartime lyrics about Nazism. Upon hearing of his death, Leyzer Ran penned a private tribute from Samarkand, where he too was a war refugee. It concluded with the memory of better days together and a defiant claim: "Bohemian Snipeshok! Stay true to the truth of the dream. May your bones rest, Leyzer. We stride onward to victory."  

I began this essay by talking about the ways in which, after the war, Leyzer Ran situated himself at the center of promoting and ingathering testimonies that might perpetuate Nusekh Vilne, the city's collective myth of its own cultural exceptionalism. One of these actions was his planned fifth and final commemorative issue of Yungvald. Ran wrote to the group's surviving members in Israel, and invited other well-known writers with a connection to Vilne to contribute as well. Daniel Tsharny, for instance, responded with delight to Ran's plans for a commemorative magazine by using the occasion to reflect on the role of Vilne as a Yiddish literary center. In the same way that Ran had expanded the definition of Yung-Vilne to include the entire interwar generation of Yiddish creativity, so too did Tsharny interpret Yungvald as a symbol for creative dynamism that was much deeper than the small group that Volf had mentored between 1937-1939:

I am happy to have been a member of a Yungvald for almost 50 years, since the moment when Shmuel Niger proclaimed the renaissance of Yiddish literature in Vilne. Fifty years ago, on the eve of Hanukkah 1907, I published my first poem in a journal edited by H.D. Nomberg. At that time, Vilne gave birth to its first Yungvald, which included [Shmuel] Niger, [A] Vayer, [Peretz] Hirshbeyn, Dovid Aynhorn, and others. [Y.L.] Peretz was more than a little upset that Vilne had begun to compete with Warsaw [as a literary center]... Thirty years later, in 1937, I was privileged again to see the rise of a new generation... It is a miracle that after this greatest of tragedies the remaining members of Yung-Vilne and Yungvald who are dispersed over many continents continue in the creative path of Nusekh Vilne. Their model constitutes the seeds of survival against the annihilation of our Yiddishland. As the Vilne Gaon once said: "Struggle, and you too can become a genius."
Others, such as Yung-Vilne’s Peretz Miranski responded to Ran’s invitation to contribute by constructing their own lyrical matseyve (gravemarker) for lost comrades, as when he invoked Glik’s refrain from “Never Say Never” in his collective elegy “Yungvald”:

Yungvald was chopped down
With axes...
Only a few managed to escape the blade.
But we go forth proudly, intact,
because of Hirskhe’s final poem.
‘Never say you have reached the final road’!

Though we were met with overwhelming
Treason and force,
Though we fell and died from the snakebite a thousand times,
Even today, when our language is dragged
To the sacrificial altar-
Never say never...

Yungvald was chopped down,
And only its melody remains.
We bear it to distant shores.
But we march down the same highway
And carry with us its greeting:
‘Never say...”

Both Miranski and Gurin adopted a musical metaphor to memorialize Yungvald. In so doing, they impressed their faith in the power of art to resonate beyond the destruction of its creators. Like a young forest that shoots up new sprouts after a devastating fire, they saw Yungvald as evidence of the regenerative power inherent in Jewish creativity.

On the other hand, let us remind ourselves of the sobering comments of historian Lucy Dawidowicz. Influenced by her experiences as a visiting international graduate fellow at the city’s YIVO Institute in 1938 and 1939 - the same years as Yungvald’s activities - she concludes:

The kind of Yiddish cultural life I was looking for didn’t exist. I had thought that Vilna might become a center for modern secular Yiddish culture, where the finest achievements of Western art and civilization could be blended with the world of Yiddish. It was a naive expectation. Just as I realized that Yiddish flourished in Vilna for the wrong reasons, because of Polish anti-Semitism and Polish economic backwardness, so I came to realize that Vilna was too weak and poor to sustain the ideal culture I was searching for.

Could one read the brief history of Yungvald as evidence of Dawidowicz’s thesis? After all, the group’s magazine did not have the communal support to survive more than four months, and even its mentor was an active member of a political organization that concluded that Jewish life could not be sustained in Eastern Europe under the current political and economic conditions. On the other hand, the very existence of a Yungvald in 1939 demonstrated the resistance of local Yiddish culture to the nihilism that could have arisen given the political conditions. Leyzer Volf and his friends in Yung-Vilne understood that they had a responsibility to guarantee that they would not be the last generation of Yiddish writers in Vilne. Though the Second World War denied Yungvald the opportunity to blossom fully, it none the less gave birth to one of the most dynamic voices of the Vilne Ghetto in the person of Hirsh Glik, and contributed core figures to Yung-Yisroel, the literary group responsible for replanting the seeds of Yiddish expression in the Hebrew soil of the new State of Israel. At the very least,
a journey through Harvard’s Leyzer Ran archive provides us with a rich documentary glimpse into a time and place when Yiddish was still young, inviting us to make our own determinations about its achievements, its anxieties, and the ways in which its sudden end emboldened its survivors to weave a fleeting literary moment into the enduring mystique of Nusekh Vilne.

Endnotes


The city changed names depending on the ruling authority. Under Tsarist rule, it was known as Vilna. In interwar Poland, it was Wilno. During the Second World War and still today it became Vilnius, capital of Lithuania. To Jews the city was known in Yiddish as Vilne, or by its nickname, The Jerusalem of Lithuania.

Leyzer Volf was the penname of Leyzer Mekler. Mekler was searching to project a more assertive personality in his writing as a counterbalance to his natural shyness. He was inspired by Heinrich Heine, the German Romantic satirist, who adopted a wolfish persona in his famous attack on reactionary circles in Deutschland: Ein Winternäcchen (see section 12 of the poem). He was also a fan of the Yiddish parodist Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, whose poem “My Restlessness Is of a Wolf” explored the contradictions of the poetic soul. In a more ironic gesture to Yiddish literary history, Leyzer Volf was also a well-known character from Sholom-Aleichem’s popular narratives about Teyve the dairyman. In that series, Leyzer Volf’s engagement to Teyve’s oldest daughter is broken when she opts to marry for love instead of the material comforts he promises to provide. In assuming this penname, Leyzer Volf was at one and the same time engaging in an act of creative reinvention and anxious self-mockery.

Sutzkever went on to become the leading neo-classicist of Yung-Vilne. His writings from the Vilne ghetto are among the most refined examples of Yiddish poetry to emerge from war, and he is widely acknowledged as the most accomplished Yiddish poet of the post-war period. He served as founding editor of Di goldene keyt, a journal of Yiddish literature, culture, and criticism, which he edited from 1949 until his retirement more than forty years later. He died in 2010.

Traditionally, the term nusekh is used to refer to a certain style, method, or liturgical formulation, very often associated with music. Here it is used metaphorically to underscore a collective energy and way of seeing the world.

When Weinreich was asked why he decided to establish the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) in Vilne and not in a much larger Jewish center such as Warsaw, Berlin or New York, he countered: “Vilne has one thing that no other city in the world has: in Vilne Jewish tradition and a Jewish present coexist. Only from these two elements can one build a future. Tradition is critical; culture is not only built with money or workers or good intentions. There must also be genius of place.” Max Weinreich, “Der yidisher
In the same way that Leyzer Mekler assumed the literary persona Leyzer Volf, several members of Yungvald followed his lead in assuming literary penames. Henceforth, when referring to these figures I will use the names under which they published in Yungvald.

Moyše Gurin, “A kurste biografie fun Moyše Gurin,” ms., Leyzer Ran Archive. Though most of Yungvald’s members were locals, Yitzkhok Vidutshinski’s parents sent him from the provinces to Vilne when he was 13 so that he could attend the city’s Yiddish gymnasium, the only one in Poland. His contacts outside the city proved useful later on when he was charged with distributing the group’s magazine to smaller Jewish towns in the Vilne region.


Fayvël Segal, untitled memoir, ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

Fayvël Segal, untitled memoir, ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

Moyše Gurin, letter to Leyzer Ran (14 December 1957), Leyzer Ran Archive.

Moldi Las (Virgin Forest) also happened to be a Polish film playing in local theaters at the time that these Yiddish writers were deciding on a name for their group.

Rabinovitch’s legal name and address was required by the Polish authorities for his role as editor. His creative work published in the journal appeared under his penname Blit.


Herts Nakh (Still of the Night), “Aphorisms and “Thoughts,” Yungvald 1 (January 1939), 8; Yungvald 3 (March 1939), 8; Yungvald 4 (April 1939), 6.

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xxxviii For more on the concept of “creative betrayal” as it relates to Jewish literary studies, see David Roskies, A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 5-9.


xlix Vilner tog (January 20, 1939).

xlii For more on Volf’s role in the local political scene and the development of Shparber [Hawk], see Mikhoel Astour, Geshikhte fun der frayland lige (New York, 1964), 364-40, 368-369, 395. On the eve of World War II, Astour claims that Shparber had grown into the second largest Jewish youth movement in Vilne in numbers, behind only the Bundist Tsukunft (The Future).


xliii In February and March, 1939 his Territorialist sea shanty “Forn mir, forn mir af shifn” was hugely popular among the youth of Shparber. It was about young pioneers waiting to leave Eastern Europe so that they could get to rebuilding the physical and cultural framework of secular Jewry in new colonies elsewhere. The rhyme and rhythm of the Yiddish original invited the poem to be recited as a mass cheer. “Here we go, here we go on ships/waves, show us the way! Towards a virgin forest/to a wonderful distant shore. / We’re off, we’re on our way/into wide open fields. / No murderers there to ambush us/It’s a promising free world. / A bird twitters in amazement,/ Are the Jews also building a new nest?/ ‘Bird, Bird,’ we answer in Yiddish/ ‘Of course we’re building, as you can see...’” A copy of the poem can be found in the Leyzer Ran Archive.


xlv See also M. Biter’s “A Slave from Canaan” (“My wine garden is in ruins/My sheep long ago slaughtered/I am but a shadow of myself/Give me the gift of eternal sleep”); Yoysel Shvarz’s “Death” (“This is how death will come: He will take me by the hand/And we will move silently/Nobody will know, except for my shadow on the wall/And my old dog who will let out a bark/This is how it will be/The sun will continue to play in the window/Nothing will be missing, except for me/I will not be there/A mere speck of sand from the shore, a piece of dust.”); and Shloyme Cohen’s “I Stand On the Edge of a Field” (“A castle is built on a cloud/And my dream is slowly drawn there/It floats there in sadness/Just like the clouds in the heavens.”). Each of these poems imagines the disappearance of the self in ways that suggest a profound generational depression. Yungvald 4 (April 1939), 4-5.


Il Blit, “Oytobiografieye,” ms., Leyzer Ran Archive. Literarishe bleter was Warsaw’s review of Yiddish literature and culture.


lll The source for the Samson legend can be found in the biblical Book of Judges 13-16. Samson’s supernatural strength was given to him by God by virtue of his status as a Nazareite. He loses his powers when his hair is shorn at the instruction of his lover Delilah, which allows him to be captured by the Philistines. His enemies blind him and seek to make a spectacle of him, but when he is brought to one of their temples after his hair has had a chance to re-grow, he appeals to God to remember him. He pulls two of its columns together, bringing down the temple on himself and his opponents. Glik was not alone in looking to Samson as a source for Jewish heroism. The revisionist Zionism leader Jabotinsky wrote a Hebrew novel about the Biblical figure in 1927 in an effort to draw followers to his political ideology.


lln Reprinted in Glik, Lider un poemes, 62. An English translation is available in David Roskies, The Literature of Destruction (Philadelphia: JPS, 1988), 445-486: “Never say: this is the last road for you, leaden skies are masking days of blue./The hour we yearn for is drawing near/Our step will beat the signal: we are here/...Tomorrow’s sun will gild our sad today/The enemy and yesterday will fade away/But should the dawn delay or sunrise wait too long/Then let all future generations sing this song/This song was written with our blood and not with lead/This is no song of free birds flying overhead/But a people amid crumbling walls did stand/They stood and sang this song with rifles held in hand.” Singing of the poem became a staple of post-war commemorative gatherings of Holocaust survivors and fighters. For more of Glik’s poetry composed between 1928-1943, see both Glik, Lider un poemes, and Mark Dvorzhetski, Hirshke Glik (Paris: Undzer kiyum, 1966).


Moysh Blit, “Oytobiografye”, ms., Leyzer Ran Archive. Blit followed Volf to Belarus a week later, and then traveled with him to Moscow. They separated soon after.


*Di brayne bestye* [The Brown Beast], (Moscow: Der emes, 1943).

“[Untitled],” May 16, 1943, ms., Leyzer Ran Archive.

Ran began gathering materials related to Yungvald in the mid-1950s when he contacted its surviving members to gather submissions for a planned fifth and final issue of *Yungvald*: “On the 20th anniversary of its organization, we decided to put together a special collection in which the remaining members of Yungvald would contribute their poems, stories, drawings and memoirs. For the first time, we will publish a photograph of the Yungvald group.” *Navekh Vilne Buletin* 3 (New York, February 1958), 18. Though the issue never appeared, the materials may be found in the Ran Archive. Ran’s archive contains a three-page typed document listing the planned contents of the commemorative issue. Its table of contents includes biographies and memoirs of Leyzer Volf, Hirsh Glik, Moysh Gurin, Moysh Rabinovitch, and Yitskhok Vitushinski, and poems about Yungvald and its members.

Tsharni, a poet, essayist, journalist, and brother of the well-known literary critic Shmuel Niger, lived in Vilne as a young adult. See his memoirs of life in the city in *Vilne: memuarn* (1951) and *A livak in Poyin* (1955).

Daniel Tsharni, “Lomir mekhadesz zayn di levone afn Vilner shlosberg,” in Leyzer Ran Archive. Tsharni ends with a famous quotation attributed to the city’s revered rabbinic master Elijah ben Solomon, the Gaon of Vilne (1720-1797): “Vil nor, vest oykh zayn a gocn.” It is a play on the city’s name (Vilne sounds similar to vil nor, which means “if you will it”). Tsharni associates a rebirth of Yiddish literature in Vilne with the publication there of *Literarishe monatshrift* in 1908. See the chapter on Shmuel Niger in Barry Trachtenberg, *The Revolutionary Roots of Modern Yiddish 1903-1917* (Syracuse University Press, 2008), 82-107.


Lucy Dawidowicz, *From That Place and Time*, 137-138.